

## LIMMUD 2009

# Looking at what the future has in store for the Jewish people

ALISON GOLDBERG

A PACKED audience attended the "What Next for the Jewish People?" panel discussion at Limmud's Conference in Johannesburg at the weekend with speaker Anat Hoffman replying to the question of what does the panel see as challenges for Diaspora Jews that we needed a stronger Israel, but not one measured by military might alone.

Hoffman is executive director of the Israel Religious Action Centre and previously a Jerusalem City Councilor for 14 years.

Mark Weitzman said the challenge was to pass on Jewish identity. Weitzman is the director of the Task Force against Hate and Terrorism and the associate director of Education for the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. He is also the chief representative of the Centre to the United Nations in New York.

Well-known South African businessman, philanthropist, lawyer and community leader Mendel Kaplan, said there had been a dramatic change between Israel and the Diaspora in the past year. For the first time Israel had the largest single Jewish population in the world and would one day hold 50 per cent of the world's Jewish population.

"We need to help Jews maintain their identity in the Diaspora," he agreed with Weitzman.

Kaplan is also chairman of the executive of the World Jewish Congress and honorary president of Keren Hayesod.

Guest speaker David Benjamin,

pointed to the gulf separating Israelis from the Diaspora and said it was not that difficult to bridge it: "We can make the future and the question is about a global Jewish people. The Diaspora is the number one asset", he stressed.

Benjamin served as one of the top legal advisers to the Israeli Defence Forces and is a specialist in international law with emphasis on the Law of Armed Conflicts and Counter-Terrorism.

Tali Nates who chaired the panel, is the director of the Johannesburg Holocaust Centre. She posed the next question pertaining to the main challenges facing Israel. Hoffman thought it was about being a free people in our own state. She said there was more than one way to be Israeli and added that there were 320 000 non-Jewish olim in Israel. "The right slant in Israel is very dangerous; what I would like to import from the Diaspora is Judaism. What we have are perfect Hebrew speakers but they are not joyous in their Judaism."

Weitzman said he shared concern for the values of Israel: "Maybe it is better to decouple religion and the state. It is worth exploring. Another point was that we have not succeeded in overcoming Jihadism".

Kaplan said we had a problem in our own team. Many had still to learn that it was an impossibility to pass on the American experience to Israeli society. Kaplan, who has been an Israeli citizen for 14 years, said the 300 000 Russians were not the real issue.

He said most Israelis had no knowledge about their own Jewish

heritage and there was an "educational" gap between daily life and Jewish practice.

Benjamin noted that Israel was becoming a very globalised country.

In the same vein the panel spoke on the challenges facing Israel. Kaplan said one advantage of living as an Israeli citizen was that you could choose what school to send your children to.

Hoffman said she hoped more and more people would be proud to become "freiers" (suckers) but understood that still after 61 years of independence the Holocaust had taught Jews not to trust the law. Weitzman said we had a tendency to see the worst of any situation.

Today, he said, was like the Seventies, not the Thirties. "We have to begin by being realistic and recognise that we have allies. We tend to demonise anybody who disagrees with us and have to stop the nonsense. The last thing is education. That is the key to finding our identity. We are afraid of the other, we deal in racial stereotypes and need an inclusive religion."

Benjamin thought the advantages of globalisation is that we don't know of any other people who have the same network and contribute so much good to the world.

Kaplan ended by saying that Max Fisher was his mentor. He told him the reason he had had access to every Republican president was because of Israel and its existence. Israel had the Diaspora to speak up for it and "we can overcome all our problems".



Ann Harris.



Yael Shalem and Wayne Sussman co-chairman of Limmud Johannesburg.



David Benjamin - Tali Nates - Mark Weitzman - Mendel Kaplan - Anat Hoffman.



Selma Browde.



Shlomy Zachary.

## Take a breather and reflect on Limmud's way forward

ALISON GOLDBERG

WHERE IS Limmud SA going, was a soul searching topic of discussion at the extremely successful third Limmud Conference held in Johannesburg last weekend.

Viv Anstey, co-founder and national co-chairman of Limmud with David Bilchitz, and Wayne Sussman, Johannesburg chairman of Limmud gave an overview of the organisation since its beginnings in South Africa, to try to answer the question as to where Limmud is going.

Work on Limmud started six to eight years ago with the idea of finding volunteers to work on the project. "About four years ago a couple of us came together," said Anstey "and held a session in Fishhoek in Cape Town."

Limmud began 26 years ago in the UK and today is held in 25 cities around the world with targets of 1 000 delegates every year. In Israel Limmud is held by the Russian community and this year attracted 1 500 Russian-speaking delegates.

Anstey says the South African contingent of Limmud decided the UK model was the way to go. "We are all volunteers and excited about what Limmud has done in South Africa. We have managed to attract a broad spectrum of people, all volunteers, all delegates who could be presenters. Limmud is not about top down but the reverse and in South Africa we have managed to attract 2 000 all round."

"Limmud," she explained "had

attracted 450 people in Cape Town this year, in Johannesburg over 800 registered and in Durban 200 people attended."

She said the organisation was organic: everyone had something to contribute. "We like to do away with titles. Our principle is to expect people to rub shoulders with one another and learn from each other. We want to be fresh, dynamic and different."

"We want to grow according to our capacity. We have found a beautiful mix of people and want to embrace people Jewishly. Everyone should be able to move ahead by one step on their own Jewish journey. We want the committee to be as diversified as the audience. In the UK the finding is that the volunteers are on average 25 to 35 years old. This is a place for young people. Chief Rabbi Johanathan Sacks calls it the jewel in the UK Jewry crown."

Sussman said there were challenges in having diverse groups on the committee but they were encouraging in every different session. "We want to have depth, democracy and diversity. This year we brought out 15 top speakers. We had 840 people on the first day. I believe we all have different experiences."

"This year a lot of people on the left objected to David Benjamin. Rabbis last year wanted people to boycott Limmud. I don't know what would happen if Ronnie Kasrils wanted to participate. Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro) came to the Cape Town Limmud making his debut. I

think we are covering a heck of a lot."

Still facing Anstey and Sussman and Limmud organisers, is the question of how to encourage the Orthodox community to participate, if not first of all endorse the annual conference.

Sussman was quick to point out that attending this year's event were three chairmen of Orthodox shuls. In the UK, Rabbi Sacks will not attend but allows rabbonim to do so. In South Africa Orthodox rabbis will not break rank. Anstey pointed out that a Rabbi Cordoza wrote a small piece in the *Jerusalem Post* to the effect that when he is asked to account he would say "I made a difference and represented an Orthodox Jewish approach".

Limmud offers an open platform to both right wing and left wing speakers who will both find a place in Limmud.

Another challenge is to find creative ways of fundraising. Some of the speakers flew on air miles belonging to donors and the Conference has given the organisers opportunities to liaise with other shuls and organisations inviting the same speakers.

Among problems facing Limmud organisers is the need to talk to the SAJBD, Women Zionists, educating people about what to expect, the Orthodox especially and reaching youth who don't go to shul. This is one of the reasons there is new leadership on Limmud every year so the organisation can grow differently.

## Grass is definitely not always greener the other side

ALISON GOLDBERG

"AS SOUTH Africans we have been emigrating for years", said Martine Schaffer. "The reality is the grass isn't always greener on the other side".

Schaffer is managing director of the Homecoming Revolution, a non-profit organisation funded by First National Bank and established to encourage South Africans to return home.

Schaffer told her own story to the audience. She spent 15 years living in London. The Durban-born girl said the best year of her life was in 1984 studying at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But in neither instance did she know much about South Africa. On her return to South Africa she decided to do something completely different to retail marketing and organisation management she was doing in London.

She went into call centre management that did debt collecting. Then she met Angel Jones, founder of the Homecoming Revolution. A year later she was re-approached by Jones and has now been with the company for five years.

She said as a result she had opened herself up to diverse things. Last week she dined with Hilary Clinton and has had a lot to do with skills issues. To date she has spoken to about 10 000 South Africans.

"We understand the challenges but choose to focus on the achievements. We live in trying times. Crime remains the main

reason people leave and don't come home. That and a fear over the future for the children of emigrants.

She said in mid-2009 "we're in a different time". In the last two to three months there has been a shift in people making choices. We are finding returnees in their mid-30s deciding to stay precisely because of education and a future for their children, or children having a sense of belonging.

Of surveys done the statistics remain around 72 per cent of emigrants would do anything to come back. Comments Schaffer: "People don't realise the stress they put themselves under. You're only as happy as your unhappiest child. As South Africans we have an inferiority complex and it shows. We blank out the positives and are very good at putting ourselves down."

"We take a lot for granted. It is easy to be Jewish in South Africa. We go to other places and try to recreate it. This is a place where we've been able to flourish. It is difficult to live in one place and plan in another."

"This is a middle class issue. We need to become more participative in wider issues; we need to fix things for ourselves, plant a garden, go to Newtown."

Schaffer says Homecoming hasn't got statistics on how many people it has influenced to return, but her gut feel is that it is in the 1 000s. But Schaffer doesn't argue with those who want to leave, saying it is their own personal choice.

## LIMMUD 2009

# Ubiquitous Aids - yet nobody talks about it aloud

ROBYN SASSEN

WE'RE STILL primitive in understanding sexuality in 2009, palliative medicine specialist Selma Browde said at the Johannesburg Limmud Conference last weekend, discussing the agony of realising her homosexual son had Aids.

Browde pointed to a biblical passage which says that adulterers be stoned. She said we didn't do that anymore; why do we hold onto homophobia? People use religion to support petty-mindedness.

"What do you do when your son gets Aids?" was the title of her talk. She couldn't have anticipated her enthusiastic turnout.

"When our youngest son Paul was five, I realised he could be gay. My biggest worry, in this eventuality, was stigma. I discussed it with my husband Jules, who said this was ridiculous: the child was five!" Call it a mother's instinct.

"Paul grew up and wanted to study drama; we convinced him a trade would be more practical; he did medicine. When he eventually came out, Jules was sad: This world is dreadful if you fit its conventions: it's worse if you don't.

"Paul did his elective in San Francisco. That was when he came out to the world. When he returned, he took a job at Baragwanath Hospital, where I was running the oncology department. He developed swollen glands; the result of a biopsy was "non-specific", which initially gave me relief. It was 1984. Aids didn't yet exist in local awareness.

He tested positive for a virus

called HTLV: Human T-cell Lymphotropic Virus. When I realised what this was, I was terrified. We simply knew Paul would die. I couldn't talk about it: I would break down. I also couldn't talk about it because of the stigma."

Paul then studied drama, debuting in London. "He came onstage in a sweet, corny act", his mother recalls, "he began singing 'I'm dreaming of a White Christmas'. I was finished. I collapsed and had to be taken out of the auditorium.

"At that time Paul introduced me to Simon, a French Canadian of Catholic heritage. It was 1987. Paul was 26. He told me: 'I am ready to die. I don't know when it will happen; my life has been wonderful.'"

But this was not to be. The following year, Paul continued his studies, specialising in psychiatry. A drug called AZT came on the market. It didn't work for Paul.

"Aids is not a disease. It is when the soldier cells (CD4) are compromised. Simple viruses can kill you. Paul's CD4 count was dropping. His viral count was going up. I couldn't ask him how he was. I don't know if he thought I was disinterested; I just couldn't let myself know the numbers. He tried many drugs. Nothing worked. Denial helped me. I kept myself busy to distraction.

"Paul's colleagues on ward rounds had the offensive habit of referring to Aids patients as "Shpos" - sub human pieces of shit. His psychiatry colleagues believed homosexuality a healable condition... No one knew his status. He came out at a major psychiatric

conference: his talk met with shock, but acceptance.

"In 1994, Paul and Simon had a commitment ceremony. The following year, a new cocktail of drugs came on the market. ARVs. It was a miracle! Within three months, his C4 count started going up."

With Murray Nossel, he workshopped "Two Men Talking". Not designed to be onstage, it was noticed by the industry and went to the Young Vic in London, and then the world, visiting South Africa in 2004.

Earlier this year, it was invited to perform at King David High, because of its engagement with bullying. Murray and Paul explained to Rabbi Craig Kacev, director of the Board of Jewish Education, that they wouldn't censor; it engages as directly with sexuality and Aids as it does with bullying. Kacev was acceptant: after the show, he endorsed its value.

Browde started a parents' for Aids action group. "This is a tool to change attitudes. Sex has become dangerous, not only for the uneducated. It thrives in this Jewish community; no one talks of it.

"Stigma comes of fear. C4 is strengthened by physical and mental robustness: Nothing in life is more valuable than a good relationship. Healthy nutrition is essential. Occupation is vital.

"If you get an infection - like a sore throat - you address it immediately. Getting tested is primary. The 'it couldn't happen to me' attitude is irresponsible. HIV isn't different from maintenance illness like diabetes or high blood pressure."

• See [www.twomentalking.com](http://www.twomentalking.com)

# Jewish law littered with obstacles for Jewish women

ROBYN SASSEN

THE MESSY status of women in Jewish law made for well-attended discourse at the Limmud Conference in Johannesburg. One headline session was steered by Rebbetzen Ann Harris, another by Anat Hoffman, the executive director of the Israel Religious Action Centre.

Chairing a panel of Janet Krise-man, Michelle Tager and Rony Sklar, Harris said: "We may be governed by civil law; we inherit Jewish law. It is immutable and comes from G-d. We are a people bound by extremes and superstitions."

Prayer and tznius were her key issues. "The idea of modesty references Psalm 45: a woman's glory is inside. In modern times, this is interpreted to have to do with how married women cover their hair or the length of skirts. No. Modesty is about behaviour; it applies to men as much as to women."

In response to oft-voiced criticism that women want to take on men in rules of prayer, Harris confronted women in the audience. "Did you pray this morning; if not, was it because you didn't have time? Maybe you didn't know how? Perhaps you didn't want to?"

"These considerations are relevant: What inhibits communal change? There are immutable rules but there's also chauvinism and complacency. Rules are necessary: someone must be responsible for the home."

For corporate lawyer Kriseman, "not being able to say kaddish for my father ruptured Judaism for me". She grew up in Cape Town and

studied in America.

Harris explained that there was no reason for women not to say kaddish. "It is being accepted by Orthodoxy. The difference between Orthodoxy and Conservatism lies in the latter's conversions and marriages not in accord with halacha."

According to Bnei Akiva-educated Sklar, "learning at Midreshet Harova, Jerusalem gave me access to tools women don't normally get exposed to. Knowledge is power."

Tager is a frum academic. "Orthodoxy accuses the secular world of superficiality; the tables turn both ways. Outward appearance is high on judging stakes between women who focus on the presence of other women's pantyhose rather than on their own behaviour.

"It is difficult for me to align myself with that world. In academia, I am taken seriously. Because I am not married, I am ignored by Haredi women. I don't want to daven with a minyan. I want to value myself as a Jewish woman."

Harris advised: "Forget the Haredi world! How we live our lives is about the relationship between the A-mighty and ourselves."

But we can't always sidestep the presence of our fellow man: Hoffman went head to head with some of the positions of Harris and her panel, while supporting others. In painting a broad image of sexism in Israeli secular, religious and political society, she told of Alice Miller, a South African olah, who in 1987 wanted to join Israel's Air Force. She was refused.

"It was of concern that she may be raped by enemies; that she was

hysterical; that she might distract men; that her physical stamina might not be on par."

Hoffman represented the landmark case that overturned military legal history in Israel, and refuted each claim. "Jewish doctrine paints women as inferior. A blessing for a man promises no weeds in his garden, no vinegar in his wine, no daughters among his sons.

"In April 1968 an uneven division for separate male and female access to Jewry's holiest site, the Western Wall, was erected. Reform women came to pray, but were assaulted."

"From 1924, rules of behaviour at religious sites were simple: no pissing, no spitting, no graffiti, no begging, no slaughtering animals. Now, there was a new one: no religious acts that could be offensive to others. This obliquely referred to Reform Jewry.

"We were fighting custom, not halacha. Government appointed a commission of men, with one woman as a voiceless observer. Twenty two months later, three alternative walls were proposed: One in the Muslim Quarter, another in a garbage dump, the third at Robinson's Arch - the world's most important archaeological site."

It took 14 years, and the most vociferous demonstrations in Jerusalem's history, for these women to be sanctioned to pray at the archaeological site 11 times a year, archaeological protests aside. Kippot and talleisim had to be worn like ordinary hats and scarves. Was the battle won? It was a bitter compromise; this is status quo, given "Israel's misogyny".

# Shlomy Zachary and David Benjamin - a seemingly unbridgeable divide

*The room was packed for the panel discussion between David Benjamin and Shlomy Zachary, due to activist Zackie Achmat calling Benjamin 'war criminal' and insisting he withdraw from Limmud.*

LIONEL SLIER

THERE WERE two major issues involved in Operation Cast Lead, namely the legality of the operation and its morality, human rights lawyer Shlomy Zachary said in a panel discussion with Lt-Col David Benjamin, at the time of the Gaza incursion the Israeli Defence Forces' legal adviser. Mr Justice Dennis Davis chaired the proceedings. The topic of the discussion was "Israel and International War".

Zachary said of the Gaza operation that Israel had a right and duty to respond to the rockets from the Gaza Strip, "but there are limits".

There were two major principles, he said. "There is the 'law of distinction', which protects civilians in a conflict, but unfortunately there is testimony that this principle was ignored by both sides.

"Israel attacked traffic police at a parade and the Parliament, UN institutions, schools, houses and so on, which were not military targets. Then there was the indiscriminate use of white phosphorous. Israel initially denied this, then pictures came out which showed that Israel used this weapon in the most populous place in the world."

He said Israel claimed to have sent flyers to the people of Gaza warning them of areas where attacks were going to take place and that they also phoned Gazans to warn them to evacuate areas about to be attacked.

"The Israelis phoned people in the middle of the night and gave them 10 minutes to leave, including women, children, the old and the disabled. Israel regarded everyone in the battle zone as a terrorist and they did not care about homes.

"The other principle was about 'disproportionality'. Israel does not want to relate to these reports despite testimony by about 50 Israeli soldiers about violations but the Israeli government reaction is that we are 'putting dirt on Israel'."

Zachary asserted: "I am a human rights lawyer, an Israeli citizen and a Jew. We are hated all over the world. We are told that (Mr Justice Richard) Goldstone (who heads a UN human rights delegation into the Gaza incursion) is biased and we only see one side."

Benjamin replied: "What we have in common is that we both served in the Israeli army and we are both lawyers, both concerned with human rights.

When I left Israel to come here, there were investigations going on by the Military about the conduct of soldiers under fire.

"Also the Supreme Court can adjudicate on military actions inside and outside of Israel. The Israeli army stresses that Israeli soldiers must believe that they are more moral than their enemies.

"There are many petitions from Palestinians living in Israel and in the Territories. If there are problems, our system can weed them out. We don't need Goldstone. In fact the United Nations' report on the attack on one of its buildings was rejected by the UN Secretary-General himself."

Benjamin then said that the story of the white phosphorous "is the biggest red herring". Also, the flyers and phone-calls robbed the Israeli troops of the element of surprise.

Mr Justice Davis addressed a question to Zachary: "Why have the international community never said much about the rockets fired into Israel?" Zachary replied that he did not want international bodies to be involved, but Israel only investigated the issue when TV showed pictures of violations and there was no other choice but to have international investigations.

He added: "The fact that Hamas lowered (its) standards does not mean that Israel should lower theirs. They attacked targets where there were civilians."

Responded Benjamin: "When you are attacking a target, Israel stressed that collateral damage (civilian casualties) must not be disproportionate to the military needs."

Speaking of the evidence given by Israeli soldiers of violations, he said: "It was all hearsay, based on rumours not by eyewitnesses. The campaign has been a public relations disaster for Israel but by what other way could Israel defend its citizens and defeat terrorism?"

• The lecture room at the Wits Medical School was packed for this Limmud panel discussion, despite this being the third time that Benjamin was speaking at Limmud 2009; people were still flocking to hear him. A lot of interest in what he had to say came about after activist Zackie Achmat had called Benjamin a "war criminal" and had asked for Limmud to withdraw him as a speaker - something Limmud had refused to do.

## OPINION AND ANALYSIS

FORUM FOR DIVERSE VIEWS

## Jewish Report

## A rich happening, but with a piece missing

FOR A small Jewish community such as ours, there is a remarkable array of learning programmes for all tastes and needs. One can go several times a week to an interesting, informative shiur or lecture on topics Jewish and otherwise.

It indicates a community that, despite troubling times internally and externally, remains vibrant and organised. *The Jewish Report* covers these programmes regularly.

A relative newcomer to this mosaic, based on the concept of many concentrated presentations, debates and workshops on culture, religion, history, philosophy, dance, food and other aspects over two days in one venue, is Limmud. In the past two weeks it completed its third annual programme in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg, drawing some 1000 people.

As successful as it was, however - and the reports on pages 8 and 9 give a taste of it - there has always been an "absence" in the atmosphere because of the under-representation of Orthodox Jewish streams, notwithstanding attempts by the organisers to draw them in. There was, however, a noticeable increase of people wearing kippot this time, compared with previous years.

Because of this absence, the impression was created of a largely "liberal" or left-wing atmosphere, making some of the sessions less vibrant than they could have been with broader participation.

One of the liveliest sessions, addressing a topic of keen interest to Jews, was a debate chaired by Mr Justice Dennis Davis, between former legal adviser to the Israeli army, David Benjamin, and Israeli human rights lawyer Shlomy Zachary, about the international legal contingencies of Israel's Gaza operation in December 2008. The auditorium was packed to the brim.

Zachary, who advises activist groups like Peace Now, confronted the question of how to be "human" in the "inhuman" situation of war. He claimed that Israeli society and the IDF, while never intentionally targeting Palestinian civilians, had become, over the years, somewhat "indifferent" to Palestinian losses.

Benjamin described the incredible difficulties of adhering to international laws of armed conflict in a situation like Gaza - purported to be the most densely populated spot in the world.

International law, he said, had been formulated largely for conventional armies of regular, uniformed soldiers, tanks, etc, fighting each other in places with relatively small civilian populations. These laws did not easily cover war against an army like Hamas, whose fighters looked identical to the civilian population and purposely operated from within densely populated civilian areas. Hamas did have uniforms, he said sarcastically, but only wore them "on parade".

Fortunately, the threat to Limmud of disruptions from the Palestine Solidarity Committee and other groups, and appeals from some quarters for speakers to boycott it because of the participation of Benjamin, came to little.

A few protestors did arrive and posted themselves at the entrance wearing black T-shirts with the words "war criminal" painted in yellow on them, but the event went on unhindered and speakers did not withdraw, including those who held views highly critical of Israel.

Limmud is here to stay, and indications are that it will continue to strengthen from year to year. The question is: when will Orthodox rabbis become part of the debates? Their participation would be welcome and would add to the event's richness, aside from offering a great teaching opportunity for Orthodox tradition. And it might become a significant unifying force in a community which has too many fractures in it.

Limmud should redouble its efforts to hasten this day, and perhaps the Orthodox world will reconsider its reluctance to participate - hopefully in time for next year's event. Only then will Limmud really fulfil its central mission - to be a place in which all participants, from the most diverse parts of the Jewish spectrum, can "go one step further on their Jewish journey".

## 'If everybody's somebody, then no-one's anybody'

IN THE Mikado, W S Gilbert pokes fun at ancestral one-upmanship through the absurd Pooh Bah boasting about how he can trace his ancestry "back to a protoplasmal, primordial atomic globule".

The subject is similarly lampooned in *The Pirates of Penzance*, with Major-General Stanley writhing guiltily before the tombs of his ancestors because he believes he has besmirched their name even though they are not literally "his" ancestors at all - he has merely bought the chapel together with its contents ("I shudder to think that their descendant by purchase - if I may so describe myself - should have brought disgrace upon what, I have no doubt, was an unstained escutcheon," he says).

Despite the reality that Diaspora Jewry were, as a matter of course, excluded from the ranks of the nobility in their host societies, the quest for ancestral "yichus" is no less pronounced among Jews. As opposed to establishing royal lineage, first prize is tracing one's forebears back to a great rabbi.

It has been quipped, for example, that every second South African Jew claims a tradition of descent from the Vilna Gaon (the late Chief Rabbi Harris, ztl, was one of those, but unlike most claimants, he could actually prove it).

According to modern-day genetic research, in fact, everyone is practically guaranteed to discover illustrious forebears if they go back far enough. In his book *Human History: Genes, Race, and Our Common Origins* (2002), Steve Olsen made the remarkable claim that the most recent common genealogical ancestor of everyone living on Earth today must have lived no more than between two and three thousand years ago.

In the generations before that, moreover, more and more people with surviving descendants are common ancestors of today's world population.

By the time one goes back a further two to three thousand years prior to the appearance of the most recent common genealogical ancestor, one can conclude



BARBARIC  
YAWP  
David Saks

that everyone living today has exactly the same set of ancestors who lived 5 000 to 6 000 years ago. What is more, every one of us alive today who leaves four or five grandchildren (making it unlikely that our genealogical lineage will become extinct within a few generations), is virtually guaranteed to be an ancestor of everyone who will be living on Earth two to three millennia down the line.

Olsen was by no means the first to advance such, on the face of it, radical ideas. Others working in the field, such as Yale University statistician Joseph Chang, had already done so. Olsen and Chang, together with Douglas Rohde, subsequently laid out these theories more formally in a September 30, 2004, article in *Nature*.

Because the number of one's ancestors increases exponentially rather than linearly, compiling a comprehensive family tree is a formidably complex task, even when the necessary available data has been amassed.

Two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, 16 great-great-grandparents - the numbers rapidly become unmanageable. Theoretically, each person going back a thousand years or so has more than a trillion direct ancestors, a figure far exceeding the total number of human beings who have ever lived.

This anomaly is resolved by factors like the interconnectedness of networks of descent, shared ancestry and the like. The mathematics of it all is exceedingly complex, and I have not even attempted to understand it.

According to Chang's model, virtu-

ally anyone with a European ancestor descends from English royalty. Similarly, everyone of European ancestry must descend from Muhammad. Wrote Olsen: "Confucius, Nefertiti, and just about any other ancient historical figure who was even moderately prolific, must today be counted among every-one's ancestors."

Genuflect as we must before impeccable mathematical logic, this nevertheless is surely taking things altogether too far. Confucius the great-granddaddy of us all? Given China's virtually self-contained isolation for most of its history, I cannot begin to see how even Europeans can be descended from him, let alone, for example, even more far-flung and isolated populations like that of New Guinea.

Notwithstanding what the mathematical models are saying, in fact, I have to question how literally the conclusions drawn from them are to be taken. There are many communities throughout the world that have, for geographical reasons, been largely cut off from the main population centres until comparatively recently, leaving (I would think) insufficient time for the necessary admixture to occur.

What about communities like the Jews who (naturally excluding those who adopted other religions so that they and their descendants lost all connection to Jewish peoplehood) overwhelmingly married among themselves, with - until recently - very few conversions to Judaism taking place?

At the end of the day, tracing one's roots may be a personally compelling journey, but uncovering descent from yesteryear's nobility, even royalty, is hardly something to brag about.

Reverting once more to Gilbert and Sullivan (*The Gondoliers*): "If everybody's somebody, then no-one's anybody." From a Jewish point of view, the aim at the end of the day is surely less to establish that we have illustrious ancestors, since we know that already, but to try to live up to that fact in the here and now.

That certain individuals not only fail to do so but go as far as to actively debase their heritage in the eyes of the general society, is a reality that South African Jews have been made all too well aware of.



Following weeks of meetings between US special envoy George Mitchell, centre, and leaders in the Middle East, President Barack Obama reportedly is set to put forth new proposals for advancing Israeli-Arab talks.  
WHITE HOUSE/PETE SOUZA SEE STORY ON FACING PAGE